



# Almost A grease spot

By Maj Devon McCollough, Holloman AFB, N.M.

**T**here I was, ready to give my all in a remote Middle Eastern country in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. Unfortunately (for numerous seat pads and armrests), the sacrifice was almost made before we touched down at Base X. While on a contract civil airline flight, our entire squadron very nearly became a grease spot short of the Base X runway ... in the desert ... a long way from home.

It all began with the standard deployment routine: packing bags, standing in lines, and getting our requisite immunizations. There was quite a bit of speculation as to what means of airlift we would endure as we traversed the globe en route to our base of operations. We openly hoped it wasn't the hellish and eternal pain of flying in a dark interior equipped with the sadistic devices known as troop seats. Even airline

culating that the powers that be had actually procured transport for us via a major airline. This sounded way too good to be true — since when has traveling via the main body of a deployment ever been anything but a grueling test of human endurance? The departure time slowly crept nearer, and the airlift rumors were solidifying into reality. A wave of relief swept through the huddled masses when the main Body Officer In Charge (OIC) announced that, within the hour, we would, in fact, be boarding a contract Boeing 777 operated by a major U.S. airline. As we boarded the passenger buses lined up to take us to the jet, the anticipation of riding in high-class comfort en route to the war buoyed everybody's spirits.

In the chaos of stowing carry-on luggage, selecting seats, and settling in for the trip, everybody marveled at the relative opulence of the cushy 777 with all of its high tech amenities. This was actually going to be a pleasant trip despite taking nearly 24 hours. The takeoff

was uneventful and we soon left the brown starkness of the desert behind. Life aboard this capsule of luxury consisted of surfing through the various movies available on the TV

mounted on each seat, listening to music, or exploring the various other features of the 777. The flight crew was very friendly and allowed us the run of the entire aircraft; something quite out of the ordinary on board a commercial airline. We took full advantage of the freedom to visit the cockpit and talk flying with the pilots who were more than willing to show off their futuristic office.

Not only were both pilots very experienced, but the Pilot in Charge (PIC) was also the airline's most senior 777 captain who was about to retire in a couple of months. With this kind of skill flying us across the pond, we didn't have anything to worry about. Since the jump seat was open, the pilots allowed one of us to sit up front during each takeoff and landing — yet another bonus of this flight which was rapidly exceeding all our expectations.

After a couple of stops for refueling on the way, we finally were nearing our final destination. The mood was becoming more somber as the reality of having to leave the stylish high-class living we had been enjoying began to set in. Looking out the window into the darkness of the clear night, there were few lights to be seen, indicative of the desolation of the country in which we were about to find

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seats in this infamous "Tube O' Pain" were not a very palatable thought.

Eventually, as we sat in our collection rooms, like so much cattle in stock pens, the rumor began cir-



ourselves. Just before we began our final descent, the crew made an announcement directing that we close all our window shades and leave them down until after landing.

Without warning, the engines howled as the power went all the way to full and the jet abruptly pitched up. Hmmm ... were we taking it around for some

changed and more than a few white knuckles had appeared. In a nearly identical re-enactment of the first correction, the aircraft again pitched down to apparently continue the approach with the engines spooling back. This time, nobody was going to be relaxing any time soon. A solemn hush had fallen across the crowd in the dimly lit cabin.

For the THIRD time??!!!! We have to be low to the ground! Who, if anybody, is flying this thing?? Just as everybody's life finished flashing before their eyes, the jet began to level out as the wheels hit the runway with a sharp jolt. When there were no loud sounds of crumpling and tearing metal, we all gave a guarded sigh of relief. Now all we had to do was make it from the runway to the ramp alive.

After the dramatic arrival, the taxi back and shutdown were totally uneventful. As people began unbuckling and standing up, the lucky (unlucky?) squadron member who was sitting in the jump seat emerged from the cockpit looking somewhat disheveled and shaking his head in amazement. Later, as we waited to in-process at our destination base, we got the rest of the story from this observer in the cockpit.

It seems that our intrepid flight crew, in the process of setting up for the approach into our deployment base, mistakenly dialed up the navaid frequencies for the international airport in the capitol city. They could not figure out why the instruments did not match with the vectors to final the radar controllers were giving. Our man in the cockpit, watching the initial stages of this clown act develop, saw the two experienced airline pilots puzzling over the disparity amongst navaid indications and the vectors they received. Amazingly, he did not speak up and tell them they had everything set up for the wrong airfield because he didn't think his voice should be on the cockpit voice recorder when the investigation board showed up.

reason? A few eyebrows were raised among the aviators when just as suddenly as the power was added, it was again pulled back and the nose lowered. Well, maybe it was just a LARGE correction back to the glidepath — "Surely, such a senior flight crew knows what they are doing." Right? Continuing down final most of us had returned to lamenting the impending finish to this heretofore enjoyable trip when ...

What the ?!?! Another huge surge of the engines and the nose sharply rose. This HAD to be a go-around since it felt like we were really hanging on the fans at slow speed clawing for altitude. In the passenger section, concerned looks were being ex-

We dutifully complied and the interior became dark with the only light coming from the emergency lighting system. This was beginning to sound serious.

Totally blacked out, the jet continued its descent into the destination base and, in typical fashion, all the pilots in the back were following the approach mentally. Despite the low situational awareness one would associate with being sealed in a dark metal tube hurtling through space, we could definitely tell when the jet was lined up on the final approach by the distinct thumping of the landing gear extending into the slipstream. In the initial stages, everything was normal as we seemed to stabilize on glidepath.



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the aircraft on the ground with little to no approach references, we may not have been put in the resulting precarious situation.

Don't be afraid to speak up when a dangerous situation is developing. The military pilot in the jump seat did not speak up because, not being part of the crew, he didn't feel it was his place to say anything. When your life is on the line, and you see a problem developing, you need to voice your concern. In this case, something as simple as identifying the correct nav aids would have precluded a situation which could have easily been disastrous. When we brief Training Rules (TR), we talk about calling a "Knock-It-Off" if we see a danger-

any situation where we see something dangerous developing which does not meet the common sense test.

In a war, getting shot is not the only danger. In the first Gulf War, there were more people hurt and killed during Desert Shield than during the actual hostilities. Here, we could have easily lost the majority of a fighter squadron en route to the Area of Responsibility through minor inattention. When people get to a war zone, the tendency is to minimize the rules and regulations we normally observe during peacetime, but this is exactly the time when we need to be more conscious of the need to mitigate risks. When in a new operating environment, going back to the basics initially gives us

As a result of having the wrong setup, the flight crew could not fly the typical autopilot coupled approach on final, so, because they could see the runway lights in the black desolation of the desert, they decided to John Wayne it. Undoubtedly, a hand-flown night approach into a strange field in a foreign country, using only the runway lighting for reference, was not something in which this 777 crew was particularly current. There was some discussion between the two pilots regarding the proper interpretation of the visual approach slope indicator lights. They apparently didn't quite have it figured out. They did, however, recognize that the lights all going red is a bad thing. In fact, they recognized this three separate and distinct times, as evidenced by the dramatic maneuvering we experienced on final. According to our eyewitness, when the third major glidepath correction ended with the sharp impact of wheels on (maybe) brick one of the runway, the pilots exchanged wide-eyed looks of surprise. Evidently, the touchdown was a tad shorter than expected.

There are three main lessons we can all learn from this incident.

If something doesn't look right, it probably isn't. We had a very experienced flight crew who, whether through unfamiliarity or lack of approach plate review, dialed up the incorrect nav aids. Instead of taking the time to sort the situation out, they decided to shoot from the hip and fly down final manually, which is probably not done very often with an aircraft as highly automated as the 777. Adding to the problem, they did not have instruments backing up the minimal outside visual references. With the fatigue of the long flight across the ocean, this may not have been the smartest idea. Task prioritization is a Special Interest Item (SSI) we brief before every flight, but how often do we actually consider its practical application? Had this 777 crew prioritized solving the navaid problem over getting

ous situation developing. In this case, had the observing pilot spoken up, most of the confusion and subsequent approach buffoonery could have easily been avoided. We also need to remember that "Knock-It-Off" is a call that does not just apply to flying, but also to

the opportunity to concentrate on the different procedures and restrictions without the added task loading of an unusually complex mission. Just as we are all taught in pilot training, when all else fails: Aviate, Navigate, Communicate. ▶

*Editor's Note: Maj McCollough is an F-117A pilot attached to the 8th Fighter Squadron.*



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